

Living by Faith

Lesson 9: Faith That Conquers and Faith That Suffers -- Hebrews 11:32-40

Read this passage out loud sometime and listen to how it turns. It begins like a victory parade. Kingdoms conquered, justice enforced, the mouths of lions stopped, the violence of fire quenched, weakness turned to strength, armies put to flight, and mothers handed back their children alive from the grave. You can almost hear the trumpets. These are the stories we love to tell our children, the ones where faith wins and the bad guys lose and everyone goes home safe. And then, without warning, the trumpets fall silent. The very same chapter, the very same word 'faith,' keeps going, and now we are reading about people who were tortured and would not buy their freedom, who were mocked and flogged and chained, who were stoned, sawn in two, and run through with the sword, who wandered in deserts and mountains and hid in caves because there was no safe place left for them in the whole wide world.

Here is the part we must not rush past. The writer does not change words when the parade turns into a funeral procession. He does not say these men conquered by faith but those poor souls suffered for lack of it. He gathers all of them, the triumphant and the tortured, under one banner, and he stamps the same word on every one: faith. The man who shut the lions' mouths and the man who was sawn in two were both, in the eyes of heaven, doing the same thing. Both were trusting God. The difference was not in the size of their faith. The difference was in what God chose to do with it.

Somewhere along the way many of us absorbed a quieter, more comfortable gospel. We started to believe, without ever quite saying it, that if we trust God hard enough He will keep us out of the deep water. That faith is a kind of insurance policy against suffering, and that when the suffering comes anyway, something must have gone wrong, either with God or with us. This passage takes that comfortable idea by the shoulders and gently, firmly turns it around. Faith is not a guarantee that you will escape the sword. Sometimes faith is what holds you steady while the sword falls. And of those who were destitute and afflicted and mistreated, hounded into caves, the Scripture pauses to say something it never says about the conquerors. It says the world was not worthy of them.

So this lesson asks you to do something brave. It asks you to let go of the prosperity dream and take hold of something far stronger and far truer. It asks you to believe that faithfulness in suffering is every bit as glorious to God as faithfulness in triumph, and that when He does not rescue you in the way you begged Him to, you have not been abandoned and your faith has not failed. There is one more astonishing thing waiting at the end of the chapter, a single sentence that ties every one of these saints to you and reaches its fulfillment only in Christ. We will come to it. For now, simply notice the two halves of this great chapter, and let the Lord begin to teach you what it really means to win.

Group Discussion: In our day, what messages do people hear, whether from preachers, books, or the wider culture, that suggest real faith should keep a person from hardship and reward them with comfort or success? How does Hebrews 11:32–40 confront those messages?

Personal Reflection: Think of a time you prayed earnestly for God to deliver you from something, and He did not deliver you in the way you asked. Looking back now, what was God doing in you through that, and how is He inviting you to trust Him in it still?

Read Hebrews 11:32–40

Study Questions

1. After naming Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, the writer says that ‘through faith’ they ‘conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions’ (Hebrews 11:32–34). What do these verses teach about what faith accomplished in these saints, and why is it significant that their victories are credited to faith rather than to their own strength or ability?
2. When you imagine a life of strong faith, what does it tend to look like in your mind? How closely does that picture match the conquering heroes of these verses, and where might your picture need correcting?
3. Beginning in verse 35, the tone shifts: ‘Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.’ What does it mean that these believers refused release that they could have taken, and what does their choice reveal about where their hope was fixed?
4. Be honest about your own heart: when following God becomes costly or painful, how strong is the pull to take the easier way out? Where do you feel that pull most right now?

5. Verses 36 through 38 describe believers who were mocked, flogged, chained, stoned, sawn in two, and left destitute and afflicted, wandering in deserts and caves. Why is it important to see that Scripture places these sufferers in the same hall of faith as the conquerors, under the very same word, 'by faith'?
6. When you have walked through a season of suffering, were you tempted to wonder whether God was displeased with you or whether your faith had somehow failed? How does this passage speak to that fear?
7. Of the suffering saints the writer says, 'of whom the world was not worthy' (Hebrews 11:38). Why does Scripture reserve this remarkable statement for the afflicted and homeless rather than for the mighty and victorious, and what does this reveal about how God measures a life?
8. Where in your own life are you quietly measuring success by the standards of comfort, security, or the approval of others? What would it look like this week to let God redefine what a winning life actually is?
9. Hebrews 11:39–40 says, 'And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.' All of these saints, the triumphant and the tortured alike, were 'commended through their faith,' yet none received the full promise in their lifetime. What does this teach us about whether faith guarantees earthly deliverance, comfort, or prosperity, and why is the popular idea that strong faith should bring health, wealth, and an easy life a serious distortion of the gospel? What does it mean that these Old Testament saints would be 'made perfect' only together with us, and how is that 'something better' found only in Christ and His better covenant?

10. Looking back over all of Hebrews 11:32–40, the conquering and the suffering together, name one concrete way Jesus is using this passage to form you. What is He asking you to trust Him for, or to surrender to Him, whether He delivers you as you hope or calls you to be faithful through the fire?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: 2 Timothy 3:12, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, so faithfulness and hardship often go together; James 1:2–4, the testing of our faith produces steadfastness, so trials are not a sign of God's displeasure but a means of maturing us; 1 Peter 4:12–13, we should not be surprised at the fiery trial but rejoice as we share Christ's sufferings; Romans 8:18, the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory to be revealed; Hebrews 12:1–2, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, we run with endurance looking to Jesus, who endured the cross for the joy set before Him.